

Altman-icana

By Josef Woodard, June 15, 2006

A Prairie Home Companion

Garrison Keillor, Meryl Streep, Kevin Kline, and Virginia Madsen star in a film written by Keillor and directed by Robert Altman.

Reviewed by Josef Woodard

Die-hard fans of great American artists Garrison Keillor and Robert Altman approach the new Altman-directed, Keillor-written script with an emotional cocktail of trepidation and elation. Would a film version of Keillor's beloved *Prairie Home Companion* pry apart the personal imagery we radio fans have concocted around such regular features as the Ketchup Advisory Board and the Chatterbox Café? Or would Keillor's domineering personality, and his blend of faux folklore and dark wit, overshadow the artistic persona we've come to know and love about Altman's films?

The end result is a happy medium, a nice, suitably loose-fitting filmic adaptation of the Keillor charm. It's nothing revelatory by either artist's standards, but is a perfectly quirky enjoyment. Altman brings his own identifiable approach to the task, with the seemingly improvisatory rhythms and floppily chaotic ensemble tapestries — qualities that happen to coincide with Keillor's own work. Even given its shortcomings, it's safe to say that Altman's *Prairie Home Companion* is as loopy and companionable a radio-to-screen project as has ever been made.

At the heart of the premise is a single radio show performed in an old theater in St. Paul, and the final one before a heartless new owner (Tommy Lee Jones) pulls the plug. Many familiar elements from Keillor's actual radio program unfold, interspersed with assorted hokum, comforting banter, and mortal doings. Kevin Kline and Virginia Madsen are peculiar narrative devices threaded through the film and the theater's byways: he is Guy Noir, Keillor's lusty Chandler-esque gumshoe with gum on his shoe, slithering and fumbling around the set in search of intrigue and cheap kicks; she is a lithe and beneficent angel of death.

The film rambles at times — and bizarrely, leaves out the "News from Lake Wobegon" monologue — but its messes are lovable and integrated into basic aesthetics through which creativity enables the license to be loose. It's a human thing, not a Hollywood thing. Altman has built his career on that idea, and even if this isn't one of his finest, *Prairie Home Companion* follows respectably in the footsteps of classics like *Nashville*, *The Player*, and even *Gosford Park*. In those films, and this, we sense that the process of diving into a milieu and a busy ensemble situation (or "building a sand castle," as he eloquently put it in his recent Oscar speech), is reason enough to keep making movies. Armed with his code of relaxed intensity, Altman keeps cranking out movies that matter.